



Harris County  
**Public Health**  
Building a Healthy Community

# *Moving Upstream:*



*Executive Summary*

**2015-2016**

# **MOVING UPSTREAM: THE STATE OF HEALTHCARE IN HOUSTON/HARRIS COUNTY AND ITS RESPONSE TO SOCIAL DETERMINANTS**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Much of what helps determine the health of our community relates to activities happening where people, live, learn, work, worship, and play.” Research shows that 80% of a person’s health outcomes are affected by factors outside clinical care, those being the social determinants of health (40%), health behaviors (30%) and the physical environment (10%). Providers and organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, and the Association of American Medical Colleges also recognize this and are actively engaging and recommending appropriate responses to social determinants of health. These are all shaping the narrative about health, as well as various policy and programmatic decisions for population health improvement. Though we can all agree that an individual has responsibility over one’s health, we can also agree that unmet social needs often impede a provider’s ability to provide quality care. Health equity is an integral part of this because some individuals and communities experience poor health due to unfair, unjust or avoidable socioeconomic or environmental conditions beyond their control rather than genetic or individual characteristics.

However, healthcare organizations as a whole have not been as quick or nimble in responding to this paradigm shift, and much of this can be attributed to social determinants of health only becoming a priority in recent years and the fact that acute episodes and chronic diseases are continuing to bear down on these institutions. Nevertheless, in the face of the mounting patient, regulatory, and financial responsibilities, healthcare institutions in Houston/Harris County have been attempting to address the social determinants of health. The purpose of this report is to better understand what social determinants of health (SDH) activities are taking place in Houston/Harris County healthcare settings and how best to march forward in addressing them.

Because health happens in and is affected by all aspects of a person’s life and because there are various synergies that need to occur throughout the process, this report looks at SDHs from a continuum of care lens along the clinical and community spectrum.

Over 100 individuals representing hospital systems, clinics, physicians, health plans, medical schools, funders, academic institutions, and nonprofit organizations from within Houston/Harris County, Texas at-large, and from across the country were interviewed for this report. Information was also extracted from a literature review, various meetings, and conferences. Many themes emerged over the course of this assessment, and this report possesses a treasure of valuable insights from those working in the healthcare sector. The content of this report and the sections developed were driven by the interviewees’ responses. There are three main sections in this report.

**Section I, “Roads to Social Determinants Response”** – Because of the intimate relationship between healthcare and SDHs, many of the dynamics and structures that affect traditional healthcare – health access, relationship between public health and healthcare, collaborations, funding, and technology – also affect SDHs response efforts. This section describes how these dynamics and structures across these areas play an integral role and present challenges in healthcare and undoubtedly have implications for SDH responses.

**Section II, “Key Local Social Determinants Priorities”** – Some in the healthcare community recognized the need to address local SDH issues – food insecurity, housing, transportation, built environment, and education and job training – and have responded accordingly. This section gives an overview of the types of SDH activities that the healthcare sector has deemed key priorities, a sample of local activities in Houston/Harris County, and interviewee insights related to these efforts.

**Section III, “Domains of Social Determinants Work”** – Healthcare occurs in places like hospitals and clinics. Healthcare employs programs and strategies such as utilizing community health workers and integrated care. Healthcare captures valuable patient and community information and uses this data when providing treatment and making operational decisions. Healthcare advocates at the local, state, and federal level to make sure it is in the best position to provide care and continue ongoing operations. These five domains are also where healthcare is responding to SDHs: 1) organizations, 2) programs and strategies, 3) data, 4) training, and 5) policy. Issues, opportunities, and recommendations are discussed for each of these five domains, and it is accompanied by local and national examples that demonstrate despite the issues, there are those in healthcare that have decided SDHs are too important to not address.

## **Conclusion**

The nature of SDH inherently requires a multidisciplinary approach and partnerships, and it requires organizations to make sure they are viewing their care through a health equity lens. Even though most of these organizational relationships are seemingly disjointed, there are signs that the silos are starting to break down and that healthcare organizations are slowly coming together to address these complex issues.

Though there are many obstacles that may hinder SDH activities, there are a number of local and national healthcare examples demonstrating more can be and is being done upstream and along the continuum. What is positive and apparent is that there is an incredible amount of energy in healthcare around SDHs, and the number of organizations and individuals participating are only increasing. Regardless of what size or how well resourced the organization is, there are many ways the healthcare sector can participate in addressing SDHs. It is now just a matter of others answering the call to get involved.

This report is a starting point and a guide in the ongoing work needed in addressing the social determinants of health.

[Link to Full Report]

[Moving Upstream: The State of Healthcare in Houston/Harris County and Its Response to Social Determinants Report \(2015-2016\)](#)

[Link to webpage that links to report and other social determinants and health equity works]

<http://publichealth.harriscountytexas.gov/Resources/Health-Data/Health-Equity>